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A CONTRIBUTION TO THE PEDAGOGY OF COMPOSITION

By ROSARIO SCALERO

JOHANNES BRAHMS, arrived at the zenith of his renown, once told Cossel—one of the few friends who could boast of knowing the master's intimate thought—that after the appearance of Schumann's famous letter in the "Neue Zeitschrift für Musik," which directed the attention of the musical world to his artistic personality, he had undergone one of the gravest crises ever encountered by an artist at the inception of his career.

Notwithstanding the affection that bound Brahms to his old teacher, Eduard Marxsen, he confessed to Cossel that his instruction in counterpoint had proved inadequate and insufficient for the attainment of the lofty purposes which he cherished. "Even from the bulky volumes of theory by Marx [so added Brahms], which, in my eagerness to learn, I had devoured in hopes of benefitting myself, I extracted scant profit. I clearly saw what an advantage Mendelssohn had over me by virtue of the admirable school to which he belonged, and could see no other way out of my difficulty than recommencing my musical education *ab imis fundamentis*." As we know, Mendelssohn was a pupil of Zelter, an excellent composer, a great friend of Goethe's, a man of superior culture, and, as a musician, an offshoot of an illustrious school whose unbroken tradition may be traced back through Kuhnau, the reformer of instrumental music in Germany, to Vincenzo Albricci, educated in the school of Palestrina, of whom he was a contemporary.

The great violinist Joachim, the friend of both Schumann and Brahms, and himself a pupil of Mendelssohn in composition, helped Brahms in his new course of education with the intuition of an artist prescient of the high destiny awaiting his friend. All are familiar with the splendid reality in which Brahms's striving found material manifestation.

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We have mentioned this episode in the artistic career of Johannes Brahms because it is an eminently significant and apt illustration of the point aimed at in this brief essay. The crisis which Brahms passed through during youth in order to supply the deficiencies in his musical education, and the perils then confronting his artistic individuality, are crises, deficiencies and perils which fall to the lot of every youth, at the present time, who is

obtaining his musical education in our institutes of art. The pedagogy of composition must be considered, from a general point of view, as a problem as yet unsolved in convincing fashion.

In fact, the theory, the science, the system employed by Eduard Marxsen in teaching Brahms (with the best of good will, beyond all question, conscious as he was of the unusual talent of his pupil and of the grave responsibility resting upon himself) do not differ, along their principal lines, from those which are to-day the basis of the pedagogy of musical composition and which took shape after the death of Beethoven.

Beethoven, as we now view him in the complex of his works and his individuality, the initiator of an art of an eminently subjective character—for the vicissitudes, tragic or sentimental, of his own life became, as later and in still more evident wise, with Chopin and Wagner, coefficients of specific value in his art—and dying without leaving disciples to continue his work directly, represents in the cycle of his Three Styles an indivisible unity, its own beginning and ending, whose like we encounter in the grand universal art of a Dante, a Michelangelo, a Goethe. He did not form, as part of a chain, a link whose place might have been taken by the first comer, supposing that his successor possessed an heroic heart fit for such emprise. In other words, the continuator of Beethoven would have to build on another foundation. In this greatest of masters terminated the tradition of the glorious schools in which entire generations of artists devoted every faculty to the continually more perfect expression of the same restricted complex of problems. When it happened that the progress made by one was slight, this served as a guide for another, and the acquisitions of the master became the property of the disciple, who added to them his own.

Beethoven, building up forms that had no prototypes in the physical world, creating an idiom that carries the liberation of his spiritual nature so far as to recast it in accord with formulas and esthetic norms whose equivalent one would vainly seek in all things that are not music—this art which, as a metaphysician has asserted, expresses definitely a truth superior to any material reality, the “*universalia ante rem*,” the primitive things, drawing sustenance from the most obscure, profound, mysterious recesses of the human psyche—Beethoven went slowly on his way, living his life day by day, well knowing that the conquest of to-day would be but the experience of to-morrow. Such rules as the practice of the art had established in any given epoch as fundamentals, could be accepted only as points of departure, for the

genius of an artist might, at any future time, render their postulates debatable.

The theory of music is, in fact, nothing but a ceaseless conflict between theory and art. The theorists of the middle ages, thinking to interpret the spirit of the ancients, and supported by the theory of Boetius, defined the art as a science—a false point of view from the outset, and one from which the musicians of the period had great trouble to free themselves. To be sure, the fourteenth century records the grandest achievement of the musical middle ages, namely, Counterpoint, the original source of modern art, in which they gave proof of the patience of scientists, and exhibited an unequalled tenacity of will and inventive genius. But their theory, as set forth by Johannes de Garlandia, Philippe de Vitry, and Johannes de Muris, constrained the artists to express themselves in a purely formal manner, limiting them to the application of a technique wanting in expressiveness, requiring them to operate in a sort of Pythagorean and abstract idealism, depriving them of all possibility of representing, by means of tones, images of the exterior world and emotions truly expressed. Similarly, some time before this, the frigid scholasticism and formalism of the Troubadours had threatened the very life of poetry! But on the threshold of the sixteenth century, in so far as music was still the prisoner of theory, instinct rebelled against scholastic intellectuality, inaugurating that liberation from the fetters of conventionalism, that triumph of truth which, after a relentless contest continuing through more than two centuries, are even now not fully attained.

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Following the death of Beethoven, with the rapid and universal diffusion of music which brought in its train the founding of conservatories and musical institutes, there arose the necessity for the creation and systematization of a musical pedagogy, by means of the theoretical literature then existing, with the precise intention of replacing those methods which had founded their tendencies and principles on the art of those great men whose names were epochal in the history of music—Okegem, Josquin des Prés, Willaert, Orlando di Lasso, Giovanni Gabrieli, Palestrina, Monteverdi, Frescobaldi, Cazzati, Alessandro Scarlatti, Corelli, Kuhnau, Schütz, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven. Programs were formulated and courses of study laid down which are still generally accepted to-day. It was agreed that the student who

devoted himself to composition should learn harmony, counterpoint, and the musical forms—with egregious fallacies at the very start. To the practice of counterpoint, which, under the guidance of the earlier masters, led the student step by step to a clear insight into the constituent elements of music, was now opposed the study of harmony.

Hence it is evident that, under such a system, the homophonic style was substituted for the polyphonic. For the fundamental conception that ought to govern the musical idiom, that is, horizontal writing, there was substituted vertical writing, which, no longer conceived in the spirit of the Flemings by whom it was practised at first, to be perfected later in the schools of Gabrieli and Palestrina (who, recognizing the existence of a homophonic style, admitted it as a logical consequence of a movement of the parts), no longer possessed—pedagogically speaking—any value but a purely analytical one, in no wise constructive in case of deviations from the cut-and-dried rules of practical procedure.

The precedence given to the study of harmony accustomed the pupil to a false conception of the fundamental elements of music, i.e., of the musical design, whose lines in reality are developed according to esthetic principles which the eye gradually learns to recognize and differentiate;—of musical invention, which is developed and stimulated by contrapuntal practice;—of the elements of a free form that is not imprisoned in a geometrical construction—later discovered to be a mere simplification of the form;—of the gradual solution of harmonic problems considered as parts which move according to esthetic laws, not confined in the strait-jacket of ironclad rules and principles which the instructor is obliged to disavow sooner or later.

In brief, all that grand experimentation under the guidance of a creative artist for the acquisition of a “technique”—of what the artists of the Renaissance called, in their incisive and significant phraseology, the “craft” (*mestiere*)—was preceded by a musical conception anti-artistic *par excellence*, which accustomed the pupil to mere analysis. In reality, this placing of the study of harmony before the practice of counterpoint—a method of procedure which taught the pupil to recognize the sound of given chords provided ready-made by the theory of harmony, which he wrote down without having learned their origin—had its beginnings in purely practical motives.

After the invention of the *basso continuo*, which reduces to set formulas the results of harmony, it became necessary to employ the so-called *maestri al cembalo*, who neatly and nicely demonstrated

upon their instrument those harmonies which the *basso continuo* called for and which instructors and conservatories were so intensely interested in supplying to the churches, theatres, and concerts. It was at this juncture, when the decadence of the polyphonic style had set in, that the homophonic style was miraculously resuscitated to accompany the melody and gradually fascinated and won over the artists. In place of the objective expression with which the art-work had hitherto been conceived, the tendency veered to subjective expression; the constituent elements of the homophonic style (i.e., the harmonic elements) tended to overpower the melodic; in other words, harmony assumed capital importance and sought in every way to establish its fundamental laws from a scientific viewpoint. And in fact, from Zarlino, who based harmony on the conception of the superposition of intervals of a third, to Tartini, who discovered the combinational tones, to Monsigny, who attempted the formulation of an harmonic syntax, to Rameau, who definitively established the value of the dominant in tonality, and finally to Hauptmann and Riemann, who set forth in a positive manner the tonal functions of the several degrees of the modern scale—all pressed on toward a victory for harmonic theory. But this theory, like any other, can be only a mere verification of facts, and we know that no present-day treatise on harmony can teach practically what is taught by an analysis of a chorale by Bach, a master who, working as he did, only followed the dictates of his artistic instinct as an admirable artist. Besides, with the vertical conception of the sonorous combinations, the individualization of the chords as positive realities, proper for use as esthetic means in any given case, led the artist to an abuse of one or another formula. Indeed, we can readily demonstrate how, after the nineteenth century, each musical period had its characteristic chord. Toward the end of the nineteenth century it was the diminished seventh-chord that was usually employed to express terror; then it was the turn of the chord of the augmented fifth with its poignant effect; thereafter the “Tristanakkord” with its depressing tone; and finally the harmonic deformations of the hexachordal scale perpetrated by Debussy and the French and Russian schools. And so counterpoint, when ushered in later, could not succeed in extricating the student from the net of established formulas, of *a priori* characterization. Hence, his style had a tendency toward imitation, the effect of being “borrowed,” while, on the contrary, he should have struck out for originality of style informed with the spirit of discovery—should, in short, have aimed at art of a broad scope,

not that sensationalism and musical impressionism which is the characteristic tendency of a certain modern school.

Having finished the study of harmony and become at that time, or even at this very day, what the French term with euphemistic elegance "un harmoniste consommé," the student began with counterpoint. After having dwelt long in the enchanted realm of Modulation, of enharmonic combinations, behold him reverted to a simplicity of resources which, to his mind, means nothing more nor less than poverty, to a restriction having every characteristic of that sordid foe of art—Pedantry! The text-books used for his instruction were, according to the teacher's preference, the treatise on counterpoint by Fuchs, that of Padre Martini or of Cherubini, Bellermann, or some modern handbook, any of which latter, in their general lines, differ but little from the earlier ones. And what sort of counterpoint does one learn from these books? Is it the counterpoint of Orlando di Lasso, of Palestrina, of Bach, of Beethoven in his latest quartets, of the prelude to "Tristan und Isolde"? Neither the one nor the other—but a species of counterpoint whose connections with the past are of the frailest, and with the present, null; a code of arbitrary rules wherein the most important characteristics of the method do not represent the technics of any period whatever in musical art. In point of fact, the student wrote and was instructed according to the methods of a discipline which was false, inasmuch as it is illogical and useless to employ it as a medium for correct writing, whether from a relative or an absolute point of view.

It is true that great artists have formed themselves in spite of such a system. Let us bear in mind how Beethoven himself continually struggled against this system which, at his time, was beginning to extend its influence; and the crisis undergone by Brahms should likewise be recalled to all those who for years have labored to acquire a technic beyond their powers until they had thrown off the heavy burden of scholastic discipline—which ought to have been an artistic discipline—with the instinct of the artist who will not resign himself to extinguishment, and turned to explore the works of great musicians to discover how they had pursued their course and gained the victory.

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What reform, then, in pedagogic methods might be proposed at the present time? A return to early times (*ritornare all'antico*) as Giuseppe Verdi sagaciously observed; a return with all the

conquests wherewith science and experience have enriched us. Instead of commencing our studies with harmony, we should go back to the earlier practice of counterpoint.

The important, the essential matter is, to give the student clear and accurate guidance through his studies in counterpoint. We must not attribute to the ancient and modern treatises on counterpoint a disciplinary value excepting with regard to the series of exercises which they propose, and which, running through the various "schools" proposing them, serve admirably to train "the hand" of the artist. But the point of departure for the technic of counterpoint, like that of the simple exercise, should be strictly defined; in actual fact, it cannot be better represented, in its fundamental lines, than by the counterpoint of Palestrina as we find it in his works, which present the most vital and palpitant phase of the art there finding expression through the simplest and most fundamental means.

The student, now conducted by his analysis and imitation of the most important forms of counterpoint through the grand period of polyphonic art, will learn from living examples how the counterpoint of Orlando di Lasso differentiates itself from that of Palestrina or Giovanni Gabrieli; he will learn what conquests Monteverdi added thereto with his venturesome harmonies that are still astounding to us moderns; what a plunge into chromaticism the Principe di Venosa had already taken, and what distinguishes him from Alessandro Scarlatti; and to what potency of expression Sebastian Bach attained. Moreover, the student will learn, following the example of Caldara, of Bach, of Haydn, of Mozart, of Beethoven, of Cherubini, of Brahms, what are not only the artistic, but also the disciplinary values of certain contrapuntal forms, such as the canon, when one wishes to mould the musical material to fit some artistic exigency; or to what mastership one may attain through much writing of fugues, as they were conceived by Bach in his architectonic treatment of musical form—such being the spirit of the fugue, a form constructed with a maximum economy of means. Only then will he be in a position to comprehend what the achievements of modern harmony signify (it is hardly necessary to note that the rudiments of harmony are nowadays included in the preliminary theory of music, such as the functions of degrees I, IV and V, together with their relations to the other degrees!), and to pass in review the achievements of instrumental music in the eighteenth century down to the masterworks of modern music. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven will teach the student what is meant by "musical form."

With reference to instrumentation, we recall another Brahms anecdote. Gustav Jenner having presented himself one day to ask advice concerning his musical education, the great master inquired what practical matters he had in hand just then. "I am studying instrumentation," was the reply. In the brusque and trenchant style peculiar to him Brahms responded: "I never knew that one had to study instrumentation so long as one had possession of his five senses!" And in reality, however needful an instructor may be for teaching the technics of the instruments constituting the modern orchestra, the art of orchestration cannot be taught except through the eye first of all, and then through the ear.

"Return to early times" for the teaching material, too. Whoever teaches the art, or intends to become a teacher, should be by nature and above all an artist. But he should strive with all his might to raise the pupil to a mastery of himself and his resources, and whatever restraint he enforces on the pupil should be only as a means for attaining the goal of liberty. For, as the author of the "Critique of Pure Reason" observes, one of the most serious problems of education is to see how one can cultivate liberty in the presence of authority and by means of the latter. And the pupil should be taught to love his art beyond all else, for to love is to understand, and to understand is to possess.

(Translated by Theodore Baker)